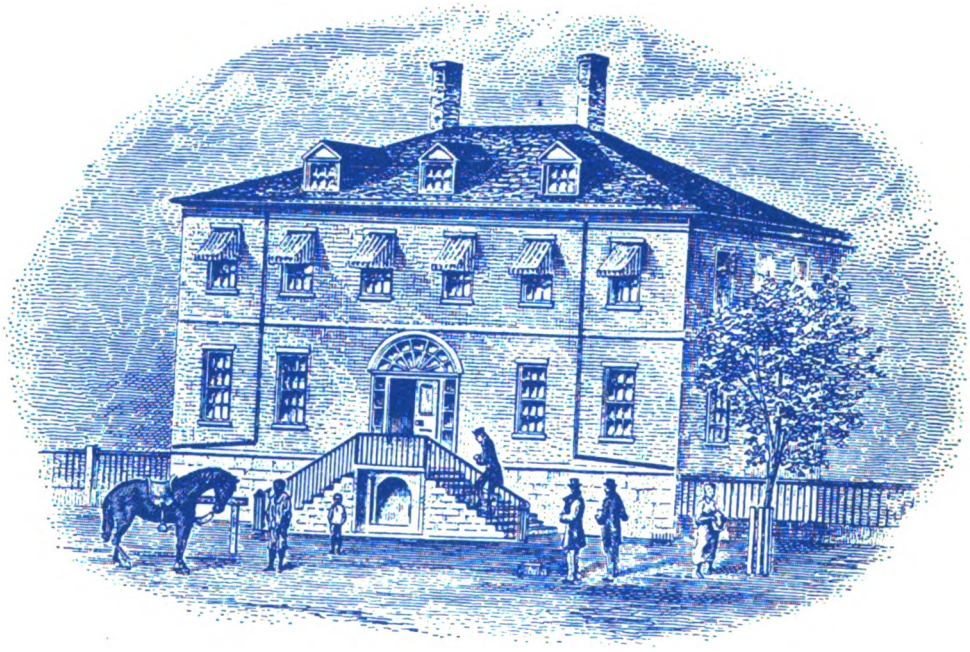
Historical Highlights

U.S. Treasury Building

Washington, D.C.



Drawing of the east side of the first Treasury Building, occupied in 1800 and destroyed by fire in 1814.

The Main Treasury Building

A President's office . . . scene of an inaugural ball . . . shelter for a President in the event of enemy attack . . . refuge for the Cabinet of the United States . . . the fountainhead of United States fiscal and financial policy . . . all are references to the Treasury Building.

The casual tourist sees an imposing monumental structure situated just to the east of the White House covering more than 120,000 square feet of ground. This structure, said to be the finest example of Grecian architecture in Washington, if not in the country, is the third Treasury Building constructed on the same site.

Origin of the Treasury Department

Even before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress provided by resolution on February 17, 1776, "that a committee of five be appointed for superintending the Treasury." During the first session of the Constitutional Congress, a law "to establish the Treasury Department" was enacted on September 2, 1789. This was only 6 months after the Constitution became the basic law of the land on March 4, 1789.

The First Treasury Building

For several years Philadelphia was the temporary capital of the Nation. When plans to move the seat of government to Washington were made, they included recommendations for a Treasury Building. This building, located on the east side of the site of the present building, was completed in 1799 and occupied in 1800 by the 69 employees of Treasury, 7 employees (total employment) of the State Department, and some personnel of the Navy Department.

This first building was partially destroyed by fire in 1801. Repaired, it continued to house Treasury personnel until 1814, when a fire set by the British as a spectacle for an invading army destroyed the building.

Photograph of State Department Building, approximately 1865. The second Treasury Building, erected in 1817 and destroyed by fire in 1833, was almost identical to this State Department Building and was located just south of it on the site of the first Treasury building.

The Second Building

Following withdrawal of the British forces, prompt authority was granted for a new Treasury Building. Once again the Treasury fell victim to a fire when the second structure and most of its contents were destroyed in the early morning of March 31, 1833. A searching investigation authorized by President Jackson led to the arrest of two brothers who were charged with setting the fire to destroy certain papers which would prove fraudulent conduct by persons engaged as Treasury agents. One brother was finally acquitted after four trials because of the statute of limitations, while the other was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

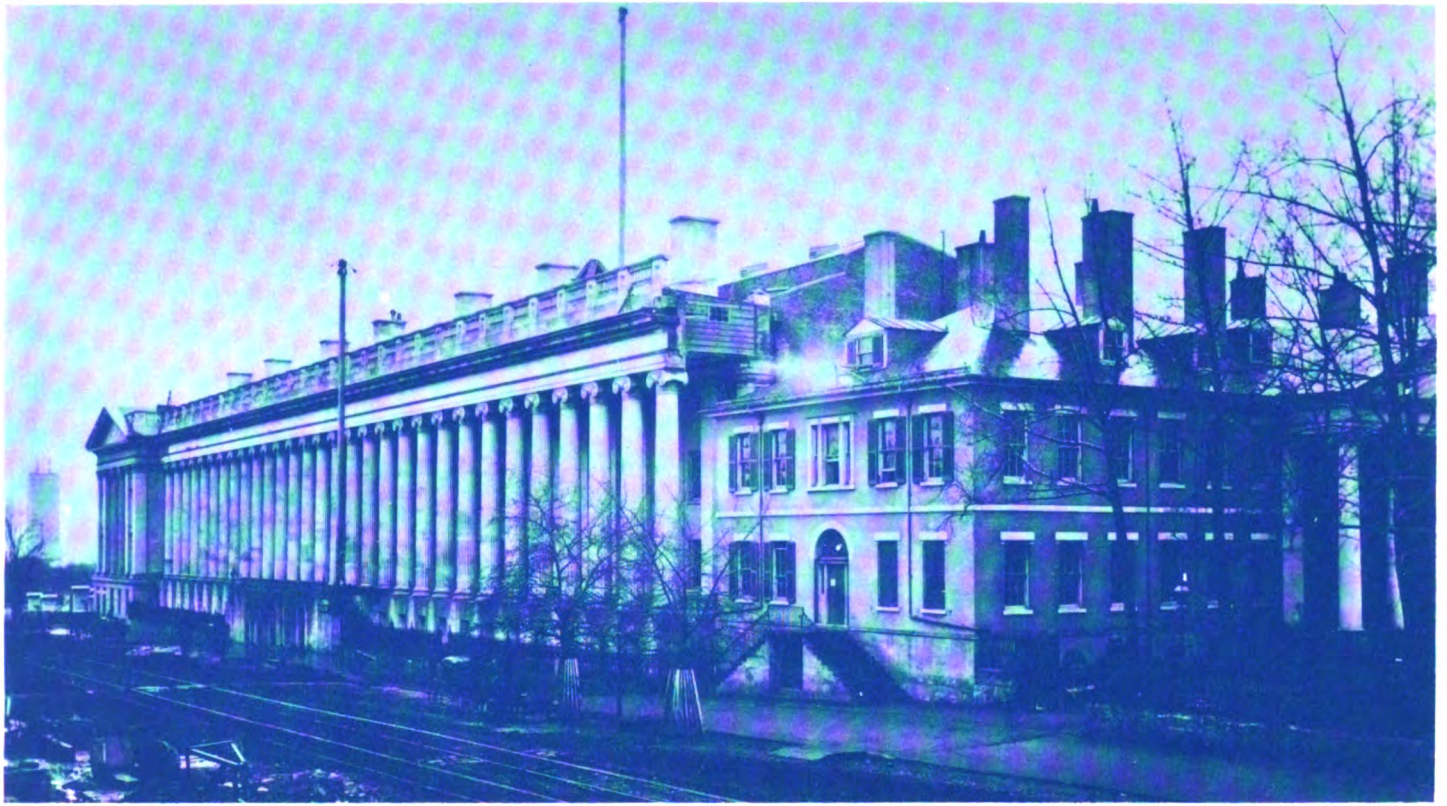
The Present Building

Apparently the next 3 years left the Department without a home of its own, but on July 4, 1836, Congress authorized the construction of a "fireproof building of such dimensions as may be required for the present and future accommodations" of the Treasury Department. Perhaps the building when completed in 1842 was an imposing structure for the time, but it fell far short of providing accommodations for the future. Having cost less than $700,000, the building, which is now only a part of the east wing, contained 150 rooms.

It was found necessary in a few years to enlarge the building, and Congress in March of 1855 granted authority to extend the building. Construction of what is now the south wing was begun in July 1855 and completed in September of 1861. The Civil War more or less interrupted further construction, but by 1864 the west wing had been carried up to the line of the present north facade.

The Department continued to grow, and the Government building housing the Department of State was removed from the north area of the site to make room for the north wing which was completed in 1869.

Thus, after more than a third of a century, the Treasury Building became the magnificent structure originally intended. But one of the results of its expansion was the violation of the original plan for the city—to leave unobstructed the view from the White House to the Capitol. The building as it is today is estimated to have cost approximately $8 million.



View of the Treasury Building, approximately 1861, showing part of the old State Department Building on the right and the uncompleted Washington Monument in the background.

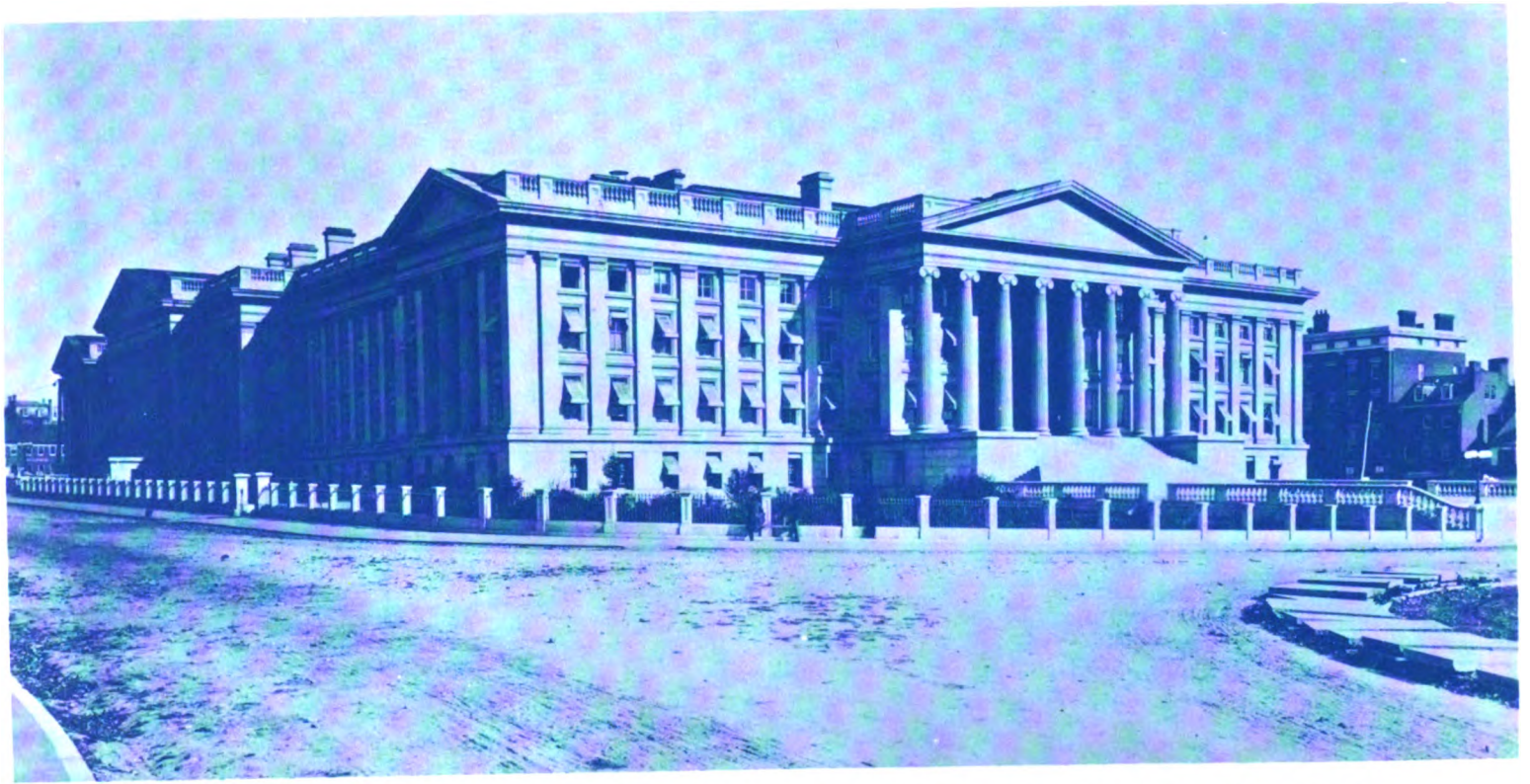
Because early planning had the entire official city facing the canal which at one time ran through downtown Washington where the mall is now located, the south entrances of both the White House and the Treasury Building are the historical front entrances of the buildings. However, as the city grew, the north entrance of the White House became its front entrance; and many people think of the 15th Street entrance to Treasury as its main entrance, perhaps because it is the easiest to enter, the other three having impressive flights of stone steps.

The stone used in the south, west, and north wings was quarried on Dix Island, near Rockland, Maine, and transported in sailing vessels. The facades are adorned by monolithic columns of the Ionic order, each 36 feet tall, each costing $5,000 and weighing 30 tons. There are 34 of these pillars on the 15th Street side of the building, 30 of them forming a colonnade 341 feet long. This colonnade has for many years provided viewing space for inaugural parades and other state functions. There are 18 columns on the west side and ten each on the north and south sides.

A statue of Alexander Hamilton, first Secretary of the Treasury, is located on the south patio of the building, while a statue of Albert Gallatin, fourth Secretary of the Treasury, who served as Secretary for the longest period of time, 1801 to 1814, is located on the north patio. The grounds of the building—rose gardens at the north and south ends and grass and magnolia trees gracing the west side—add much to the beauty of the building.

The interior, although it has been altered many times, reminds one that this is an old building. The deeply worn stone steps leading to all floors show the many years they were used before elevators were installed. Even the elevators are nearly collector's items, one having been installed in 1898. As of this writing, there is in the entire building only one really modern elevator, installed during 1959. All elevators will eventually be replaced by automatic self-operating cars. There are still signs of the early heating devices in the form of fireplaces, some of which can still be used. The building was originally lighted by oil lamps, and the sanitary accommodations were no doubt just as primitive.

The Treasury Building is used primarily for executive offices, the Secretary of the Treasury occupying a suite on the third floor. Despite its size, the Building can today accommodate only about 10 percent of all Treasury personnel located in Washington. Seven other buildings house Treasury employees, and it is necessary to rent additional space to meet all needs.



The present Treasury Building, about the time of its completion in 1869, showing the south and west wings.

In the basement there are 15 vaults ranging in size from 10 feet by 16 feet to 50 feet by 90 feet. Stored therein are currency, coins, bonds, and securities. At one time most of the Nation's gold and silver bullion was also stored in the vaults, but there are no longer any bulk quantities of bullion located in the Main Treasury Building. The vaults are securely protected by combination and time locks and by an electrical protection system which alerts the captain of the guard, the U.S. Secret Service, and local police headquarters to any attempt to tamper with the locks or otherwise violate the security of the system. Partially because of these vaults the building is protected by the Treasury Guard Force, supervised by Secret Service. The basement also houses a pistol range used by Secret Service and other enforcement personnel to maintain marksmanship. The rest of the basement area is used for maintenance equipment and personnel, store rooms, etc.

The large Cash Room at the north end of the building was used on March 4, 1869, for the inaugural ball for President Grant's first inauguration. The Cash Room, the walls, window frames, and doors of which are of solid marble, is still a magnificent area, two stories high, with an atmosphere of dignity and tradition.

Among the many interesting architectural features of the building are the unique stairways that appear somehow to be suspended in midair. Actually the steps are cut-worked granite and/or marble blocks cantilevered from structural walls, partially supported by the arch action of the steps.

The fifth floor, which was formerly the attic, was renovated for office space in 1910. It is also interesting to note that the name of the building was not made a permanent part of the structure until 1958, more than 100 years after the Treasury was built.

Building Occupants

In addition to the Secretary of the Treasury and his top staff, the Main Treasury Building houses the top officials of the Bureau of Accounts, the Bureau of the Public Debt, the Office of the Treasurer of the United States, the Comptroller of the Currency, the U.S. Secret Service, the Bureau of the Mint, and the Office of International Finance. Other important activities of the Department, such as Internal Revenue Service, Engraving and Printing, Coast Guard, Customs, Narcotics, and the Savings Bonds Division, are housed in nearby buildings.

Among the activities which once were a part of the Treasury Department and are now parts of other organizations are the Postal Service until 1829; the General Land Office (now the Interior Department); some of the activities which later were assigned to the Departments of Commerce and Labor in 1903; some of the major functions now assigned to the General Accounting Office; the Public Health Service of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; the Public Buildings Service (formerly the Supervising Architect) and the Federal Supply Service (formerly the Procurement Division) of the General Services Administration; and the Bureau of the Budget.

In this building were developed the ideas for organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and more recently the Inter American Development bank. Also in this building plans were made for the lend lease program of World War II, and for expediting the building of the United States Air Corps as it was in World War II.

Historic and Human Interest Events

The Treasury Department Building has been the locale of a number of interesting events, one of the earliest involving President Jackson who, during the laying of the cornerstone, placed therein a satin-lined case containing a golden lock of the hair of the infant daughter of his confidential adviser and secretary, who was Mrs. Jackson's nephew. This girl, Mary Emily Donelson, was later employed in Treasury. Today the location of that cornerstone is inaccessible because of the extension of the outer limits of the building.

President Andrew Johnson used one of the Treasury offices on the present third floor as his office immediately following the assassination of President Lincoln, to allow Mrs. Lincoln to move from the White House unhurried. A picture of a Cabinet meeting held in that room testifies to this unusual arrangement.

During World War II a tunnel connected the White House to the Treasury. There was in the basement a furnished shelter area for the President of the United States in case he was unable to avoid enemy attack any other way. During this period the basement of the Treasury would also have served as a refuge for the entire Cabinet, had that been necessary.

As recently as the early 1940's some of the offices contained items precious to this country's history—documents such as the Louisiana Purchase, one of George Washington's travel account books, files con-

taining notes from President Lincoln. These have been turned over to the National Archives and other organizations for preservation.

The First Baptist Church of Washington, D.C., held its first meeting in the building, and in recent years has held commemorative meetings on the south steps. These steps were used during the Second World War for massive bond rallies in which entertainment celebrities participated to sell war bonds to finance this Nation's tremendous war effort. They have also been used for inaugurating community chest and other drives.

Conclusion

People who have worked in the Department become personally involved in tradition and in the Treasury building itself. When structural changes are proposed, everyone is interested and opposition sometimes develops. There was even resistance to the proposal that the building be cleaned and bird-proofed to discourage the roosting of pigeons and starlings; but in 1954, objections notwithstanding, the building was both cleaned and wired for electronic repelling of birds. Today, the U.S. Treasury Building is a comfortable air-conditioned building, conforming to all standards of a healthful working environment, yet reflecting the atmosphere of mellowed dignity which comes with the passing of purposeful years.

An area of special interest in today's building is the Exhibit Room located on the second floor. All organizations of the Department—fiscal, currency and coin manufacturing, enforcement, revenue, customs, the Coast Guard—have been invited to place exhibits in this room which is open to the public. Every attempt is made to keep these exhibits up to date, and the public has been helpful in adding, either by gift or by loan, items of general interest having some Treasury background.

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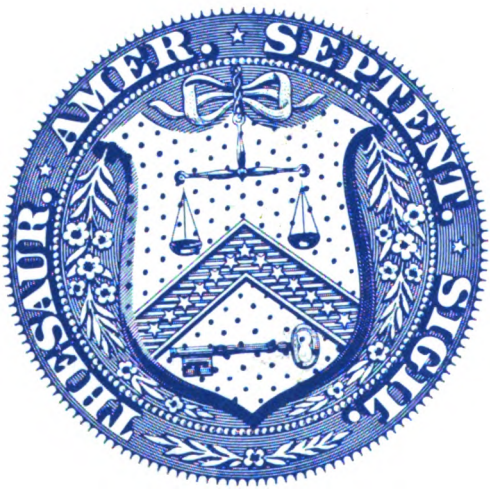
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